

## EUGENE DEBS

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### BACKGROUND

As a young man Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926) appeared destined for a career as a labor leader and Democratic politician. However, after losing faith in American capitalism he turned to socialism. His commitment to humanitarian reform led him to believe the capitalist control of society should be terminated.

At the age of fifteen Debs went to work for the railroad in his home town of Terre Haute, Indiana. After rising through the ranks of his local union he gained recognition as a promising young politician. He was twice elected city clerk before his election to the Indiana State Assembly.

In 1894, when Debs was president of the American Railway Union, he led a strike against industrialist George Pullman. During an economic depression Pullman instituted harsh pay cuts while refusing to cut prices in his company town. Pullman believed workers should suffer more than anyone during a depression since he believed workers contributed little to the success of a business. The strike against Pullman was declared illegal. Debs, however, refused to end the strike and spent six months in prison for contempt of court.

In prison Debs had time to read and reflect. Believing that unions would fail against capitalist power, he concluded that European ideas of socialism were the answer to labor's problems. After his release from prison he helped organize the Socialist party. As a popular and legendary personality Debs was nominated five times by the Socialist party to run for president of the United States. In the elections of 1912 and 1920 he received over one million votes.

In the 1920 election Debs had to campaign from a prison cell. During World War I the government passed the Sedition Act effectively making criticism of the government a criminal offense. Debs, who opposed World War I, was not swayed by the Sedition Act and made a speech questioning the traditional idea of wartime patriotism. Although he defended himself on the grounds that the First Amendment guaranteed freedom of speech, he was sentenced to ten years in prison. After serving five years he was pardoned by President Harding. Debs died in his home town of Terre Haute in 1926.

**EUGENE DEBS - IN HIS OWN WORDS****"Outlook for Socialism in the United States," 1900**

As a rule, large capitalists are Republicans and small capitalists are Democrats, but workingmen must remember that they are all capitalists, and that the many small ones, like the fewer large ones, are all politically supporting their class interests, and this is always and everywhere the capitalist class.

Whether the means of production—that is to say, the land, mines, factories, machinery, etc.—are owned by a few large Republican capitalists, who organize a trust, or whether they be owned by a lot of small Democratic capitalists, who are opposed to the trust, is all the same to the working class. Let the capitalists, large and small, fight this out among themselves.

The working class must get rid of the whole brood of masters and exploiters, and put themselves in possession and control of the means of production, that they may have steady employment without consulting a capitalist employer, large or small, and that they may get the wealth their labor produces, all of it, and enjoy with their families the fruits of their industry in comfortable and happy homes, abundant and wholesome food, proper clothing, and all other things necessary to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is therefore a question not of "reform," the mask of fraud, but of revolution. The capitalist system must be overthrown, class-rule abolished, and wage-slavery supplanted by cooperative industry.

**"The Negro in the Class Struggle," 1903**

The history of the Negro in the United States is a history of crime without parallel.

Why should the white man hate him? Because he stole him from his native land and for two centuries and a half robbed him of the fruit of his labor, kept him in beastly ignorance, and subjected him to the brutal domination of the lash? Because he tore the black child from the breasts of its mother and ravished the black man's daughter before her father's eyes? . . .

I have said and say again that, properly speaking, there is no Negro question outside of the labor question—the working-class struggle. Our position as Socialists and as a party is perfectly plain. We have simply to say: "The class struggle is colorless." The capitalists, white, black, and other shades, are on one side and the workers, white, black, and all other colors, on the other side. . . .

We have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all the races.

The Socialist party is the party of the working class, regardless of color—the whole working class of the whole world.

**"Woman-Comrade and Equal," undated**

I am glad to align myself with a party that declares for absolute equality

between the sexes. Anything less than this is too narrow for twentieth-century civilization, and too small for a man who has a right conception of manhood. . . .

Under our brutal forms of existence, beating womanhood to dust, we have raged in passion for the individual woman, for use only. Some day we shall develop the social passion for womanhood, and then the gross will disappear in service and justice and companionship. Then we shall lift woman from the mire where our fists have struck her, and set her by our side as our comrade and equal and that will be love indeed.

#### "Revolutionary Unionism," 1905

We are engaged today in a class war; and why? For the simple reason that in the evolution of the capitalist system in which we live, society has been mainly divided into two economic classes—a small class of capitalists who own the tools with which work is done and wealth is produced, and a great mass of workers who are compelled to use those tools. Between these two classes there is an irrepressible economic conflict. . . .

By virtue of his private ownership of the social tool—made and used by the cooperative labor of the working class—the employer has the economic power to appropriate to himself, as a capitalist, what is produced by the social labor of the working class. This accounts for the fact that the capitalist becomes fabulously rich, lives in a palace where there is music and singing and dancing, and where there is the luxury of all climes, while the workingmen who do the work and produce the wealth and endure the privations and make the sacrifices of health and limb and life, remain in a wretched state of poverty and dependence. . . .

We insist that all the workers in the whole of any given plant shall belong to one and the same union.

This is the very thing the workers need and the capitalist who owns the establishment does not want. . . .

The capitalists are perfectly willing that you shall organize, as long as you don't do a thing against them; as long as you don't do a thing for yourselves. You cannot do a thing for yourselves without antagonizing them; and you don't antagonize them through your craft unions nearly as much as you buttress their interests and prolong their mastery. . . .

Since you have looked yourself over thoroughly, you realize by this time that, as a workingman, you have been supporting, through your craft unions and through your ballots, a social system that is the negation of your manhood. . . .

[The capitalist] doesn't own you under the law, but he does under the fact.

Why? Because he owns the tool with which you work, and you have got to have access to that tool if you work; and if you want to live you have got to work. If you don't work you don't eat; and so, scourged by hunger pangs, you look about for that tool and you locate it, and you soon discover that between yourself, a workingman, and that tool that is an essential part of

yourself in industry, there stands the capitalist who owns it. He is your boss; he owns your job, takes your product, and controls your destiny. Before you can touch that tool to earn a dime you must petition the owner of it to allow you to use it, in consideration of your giving to him all you produce with it, except just enough to keep you alive and in working order.

#### **Speech at Girard, Kansas, 1908**

We were taught under the old ethic that man's business upon this earth was to look out for himself. That was the ethic of the jungle; the ethic of the wild beast. Take care of yourself, no matter what may become of your fellowman. Thousands of years ago the question was asked: "Am I my brother's keeper?" That question has never yet been answered in a way that is satisfactory to civilized society.

Yes, I am my brother's keeper. I am under a moral obligation to him that is inspired, not by any maudlin sentimentality, but by the higher duty I owe to myself. What would you think of me if I were capable of seating myself at a table and gorging myself with food and saw about me the children of my fellow beings starving to death?

#### **Speech accepting the Socialist nomination for President, 1912**

The Socialist party's mission is not only to destroy capitalist despotism but to establish industrial and social democracy. To this end the workers are steadily organizing and fitting themselves for the day when they shall take control of the people's industries and when the right to work shall be as inviolate as the right to breathe the breath of life.

Standing as it does for the emancipation of the working class from wage-slavery, for the equal rights and opportunities of all men and all women, for the abolition of child labor and the conservation of all childhood, for social self-rule and the equal freedom of all, the Socialist party is the party of progress, the party of the future, and its triumph will signalize the birth of a new civilization and the dawn of a happier day for all humanity.

#### **"Jesus the Supreme Leader," 1914**

Jesus was the grandest and loftiest of human souls—sun-crowned and God-inspired; a full-statured man, red-blooded and lion-hearted, yet sweet and gentle as the noble mother who gave him birth.

He had the majesty and poise of a god, the prophetic vision of a seer, the great, loving heart of a woman, and the unaffected innocence and simplicity of a child.

This was and is the martyred Christ of the working class, the inspired evangel of the downtrodden masses, the world's supreme revolutionary leader, whose love for the poor and the children of the poor hallowed all the days of his consecrated life, of his death, and gave to the ages his divine inspiration and his deathless name.

### **Speech to the Jury, 1918**

I have read some history. I know that it is ruling classes that make war upon one another, and not the people. In all the history of this world the people have never yet declared a war. Not one. I do not believe that really civilized nations would murder one another. I would refuse to kill a human being on my own account. Why should I at the command of any one else, or at the command of any power on earth?

Twenty centuries ago there was one appeared upon earth we know as the Prince of Peace. He issued a command in which I believe. He said, "Love one another." He did not say, "Kill one another," but "Love one another." He espoused the cause of the suffering poor . . . and the poor heard him gladly. It was not long before he aroused the ill will and hatred of the usurers, the money changers, the profiteers, the high priests, the lawyers—in a word, the ruling class. They said of him just what the ruling class says of the Socialist today, "He is preaching dangerous doctrine. He is inciting the common rabble. He is a menace to peace and order." And they had him arraigned, tried, convicted, condemned, and they had his quivering body spiked to the gates of Jerusalem. . . .

War does not come by chance. War is not the result of accident. There is a definite cause for war, especially a modern war. The war that began in Europe can readily be accounted for. For the last forty years, under this international capitalist system, this exploiting system, these various nations of Europe have been preparing for the inevitable. And why? In all these nations the great industries are owned by a relatively small class. They are operated for the profit of that class. And great abundance is produced by the workers; but their wages will only buy back a small part of their product. What is the result? They have a vast surplus on hand; they have got to export it; they have got to find a foreign market for it. As a result of this these nations are pitted against each other. They are industrial rivals—competitors. They begin to arm themselves to open, to maintain the market and quickly dispose of their surplus. There is but the one market. All these nations are competitors for it, and sooner or later every war of trade becomes a war of blood.

Now where there is exploitation there must be some form of militarism to support it. Wherever you find exploitation you find some form of military force.

### **Walls and Bars, 1926**

I marvel at the incredible stupidity that blinds the men in control of prisons to the redeeming power of kindness as a substitute for the destructive power of brutality. Every instinct of our nature protests against cruelty to the helpless and defenseless, yet of all places where it is most needed mercy is least practiced in the treatment of convicts. I have seen men of mild temper and gentle disposition made sullen and vicious by harshness and I have also seen the toughest specimens of "bad men" softened and made gentle by a kind word and the touch of a friendly hand. . . .

Crime in all of its varied forms and manifestations is of such a common nature under the capitalist system that capitalism and crime have become almost synonymous terms.

Private appropriation of the earth's surface, the natural resources, and the means of life is nothing less than a crime against humanity, but the comparative few who are the beneficiaries of this iniquitous social arrangement, far from being viewed as criminals meriting punishment, are the exalted rulers of society and the people they exploit gladly render them homage and obeisance. . . .

Multiplied thousands of men, women and children are killed and maimed in American industry by absolutely preventable accidents every year, yet no one ever dreams of indicting the capitalist masters who are guilty of the crime. The capitalist owners of fire traps and of fetid sweating dens, where the lives of the workers are ruthlessly sacrificed and their health wantonly undermined, are not indicted and sent to prison for the reason that they own and control the indicting machinery just as they own and control the industrial machinery in their system. . . .

Capitalism needs and must have the prison to protect itself from the criminals it has created. It not only impoverishes the masses when they are at work, but it still further reduces them by not allowing millions to work at all. The capitalist's profit has supreme consideration; the life of the workers is of little consequence.

If a hundred men are blown up in a mine a hundred others rush there eagerly to take the places of the dead even before the remnants of their bodies have been laid away. Protracted periods of enforced idleness under capitalism have resulted in thousands of industrious working men becoming tramps and vagabonds, and in thousands of tramps and vagabonds becoming outcasts and criminals.

It is in this process that crime is generated and proceeds in its logical stages from petty larceny to highway robbery and homicide. Getting a living under capitalism—the system in which the few who toil not are millionaires and billionaires, while the mass of the people who toil and sweat and produce all the wealth are victims of poverty and pauperism—getting a living under this inexpressibly cruel and inhuman system is so precarious, so uncertain, fraught with such pain and struggle that the wonder is not that so many people become vicious and criminal, but that so many remain in docile submission to such a tyrannous and debasing condition. . . .

. . . The most casual examination of the inmates of jails and prisons shows the great majority of them at a glance to be of the poorer classes.

When, perchance, some rich man goes to prison the instance is so remarkable that it excites great curiosity and amazement. A rich man does not fit in prison. The prison was not made for him; he does not belong there and he does not stay there. The rich man goes to prison only as the exception to prove the rule.

## EUGENE DEBS - A SIMULATED INTERVIEW

### 1. What is wrong with capitalism?

- A. Capitalism divides society into two classes—a small class of capitalists who own the tools of production and the great mass of workers who use the tools of production.
- B. Capitalists use their ownership of the tools of production to accumulate wealth and support an extravagant lifestyle. Workers, who do all the work and produce all the wealth, are condemned to a state of poverty and dependence.
- C. Capitalism enriches a few while the mass of people struggle for a minimal existence. Capitalists care only about profit; the life of a worker is of little consequence.
- D. Workers are slaves to the capitalists. Workers are denied a livelihood unless the capitalist provides a job. Workers do not control their own destiny.
- E. The capitalist wage system breeds oppression, exploitation, and war.

### 2. What causes crime?

- A. Crime is synonymous with capitalism. Capitalist society needs prisons to protect itself from the criminals it creates.
- B. Millions of people are unemployed in a capitalist system. Extended periods of joblessness turn workers into tramps and criminals. The capitalist system generates crime.
- C. In a capitalist system workers do not control their own destiny; the ability to make a living is doubtful. In such an inhumane system many people become vicious criminals.
- D. Capitalists are guilty of vast crimes against humanity. They destroy natural resources. They kill and maim workers in factories. These are great crimes that should be punished. Rather than receiving punishment, however, capitalists are glorified as the leaders of society.
- E. The great majority of people in prison are from the poorer classes. When a rich man happens to go to jail great curiosity and excitement are aroused. In a capitalist system a rich person in prison is a rarity.

### 3. Should American workers support Democrats or Republicans?

- A. Both Republicans and Democrats represent capitalist interests. Republicans are big business capitalists who organize trusts. Democrats are small business capitalists who oppose trusts. Whether Republicans or Democrats control political power makes no difference to the working class.
- B. When Democrats or Republicans promise reform, they are guilty of fraud. Workers will never achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness until the capitalist system is overthrown.

**4. How can society be improved?**

- A. The Socialist Party proposes several fundamental changes:
1. Capitalism should be abolished.
  2. Workers should be freed from the slavery of the wage system.
  3. Workers should own and control the tools of production.
  4. The right to work should be as important as the right to breathe.
  5. All men and women should have equal rights and opportunities.
  6. Child labor should be abolished.
- B. Each individual should recognize a moral obligation to help others. The idea of living according to the law of the jungle violates the moral truth that we are our brother's keeper.
- C. People should recognize the benefits of treating others with kindness. Harsh treatment makes all people, even criminals, more vicious. The toughest people are softened by gentle and kind treatment.

**5. How will the Socialist party help African-Americans and women?**

- A. Crimes committed against blacks are without parallel in history. Africans were stolen from their native land, robbed of the product of their labor, kept in ignorance, and subjected to severe punishment. The Socialist party, however, offers no program just for blacks. The Socialist party is for the entire working class regardless of color. All races are equal.
- B. The Socialist party believes in the absolute equality of the sexes.

**6. How does socialism correspond to the teachings of Jesus?**

- A. The socialist desire to help the poor stems from the teachings of Jesus. Jesus was a revolutionary leader who loved the poor and valued all life.
- B. Jesus fought for peace and brotherhood; socialists believe in peace and brotherhood.
- C. Jesus, like those who are socialist, was denounced for preaching what was considered a dangerous doctrine.
- D. Socialists are opposed to war. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, said "Love one another." Jesus did not say "Kill one another."

**7. Why do nations go to war?**

- A. War is made by the ruling classes. The people never make war.
- B. War is inevitable between competitive capitalist nations. The causes of war are grounded in the capitalist system:
1. Workers produce a surplus of products, but are not paid enough to buy the products.
  2. Capitalists who cannot sell their products domestically are forced to find foreign markets.
  3. Capitalist nations must arm themselves and go to war to protect their foreign markets.

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

## Vocabulary

Define the following terms before reading the lesson on Debs.

- |              |               |                |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1. buttress  | 7. iniquitous | 13. sullen     |
| 2. docile    | 8. maudlin    | 14. supplant   |
| 3. evangel   | 9. obeisance  | 15. synonymous |
| 4. exploiter | 10. privation | 16. usurer     |
| 5. fetid     | 11. rabble    | 17. vagabond   |
| 6. homage    | 12. scourged  | 18. wantonly   |

## Review

1. Whom did Debs lead a strike against in 1894 when he was head of the American Railway Union?
2. Why did Debs go to jail during the Pullman strike?
3. How many times did the Socialist party nominate Debs for president of the United States?
4. Why did Debs go to jail during World War I?
5. According to Debs, what two social classes does capitalism produce?
6. In what way did Debs think workers were slaves to capitalists?
7. In what way did Debs think capitalism generated crime?
8. In what way did Debs think capitalists were guilty of great crimes against humanity?
9. What did Debs believe was the chief difference between Democrats and Republicans?
10. What did Debs believe was necessary for American workers to achieve "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?
11. What did Debs feel was a moral obligation of each individual?
12. How did Debs think society would benefit from people treating others with kindness?
13. What program did Debs offer to help African-Americans?
14. What did Debs believe was the basis of the socialist desire to help the poor?
15. In what way did Debs think Jesus was like a socialist?
16. Who did Debs think was responsible for war?
17. Why did Debs think war was inevitable between capitalist nations?
18. Decide whether the following statements are **True** or **False** according to Eugene Debs.
  - A. Although workers produce all wealth, they are condemned to a state of poverty.
  - B. Oppression, exploitation, and war are natural consequences of the capitalist system.
  - C. A rich person is as likely to go to prison as a poor person.
  - D. Capitalism should be abolished.
  - E. Child labor should be abolished.

**What do you think?**

On a scale of one through five, rate your opinion of the following quotations by Debs. Write a short statement explaining your rating.

**1** – You **strongly agree** with the statement *or* you feel the statement is **admirable** considering the historical circumstances surrounding it.

**5** – You **strongly disagree** with the statement *or* you feel the statement is **contemptible** considering the historical circumstances surrounding it.

- A. *As a rule, large capitalists are Republicans and small capitalists are Democrats, but workingmen must remember that they are all capitalists, and that the many small ones, like the fewer large ones, are all politically supporting their class interests, and this is always and everywhere the capitalist class.*
- B. *The working class must get rid of the whole brood of masters and exploiters, and put themselves in possession and control of the means of production.*
- C. *It is therefore a question not of "reform," the mask of fraud, but of revolution.*
- D. *Yes, I am my brother's keeper. I am under a moral obligation to him that is inspired, not by any maudlin sentimentality, but by the higher duty I owe myself.*
- E. *[Jesus was] the inspired evangel of the downtrodden masses, the world's supreme revolutionary leader, whose love for the poor and the children of the poor hallowed all the days of his consecrated life, of his death, and gave to the ages his divine inspiration and his deathless name.*
- F. *It is the ruling classes that make war upon one another, and not the people.*
- G. *I marvel at the incredible stupidity that blinds the men in control of prisons to the redeeming power of kindness as a substitute for the destructive power of brutality.*
- H. *Crime in all of its varied forms and manifestations is of such a common nature under the capitalist system that capitalism and crime have become almost synonymous terms.*
- I. *The most casual examination of the inmates of jails and prisons shows the great majority of them at a glance to be of the poorer classes.*
- J. *A rich man does not fit in prison. The prison was not made for him; he does not belong there and he does not stay there.*
- K. *I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth, and I am a citizen of the world.*
- L. *When great changes occur in history, when great principles are involved, as a rule the majority are wrong.*